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ABSTRACT

Effects of the label "mentally retarded" on attitudes of peers were examined among 48 third grade pupils. Half of the Ss were shown a videotape of an actor displaying acting out behavior, while the remaining Ss were shown a videotape with the same actor engaging in passive behavior. Half of the Ss in each group were told that the actor was a mentally retarded boy in a special class and the other half were told that he was a fifth grade pupil. Analysis of variance results revealed a significant interaction between label and behavior, indicating that Ss responded more negatively to the "mentally retarded" actor who displayed acting out behavior than to the same actor who exhibited identical behavior but was not labeled. Data suggested that labels should be considered only as they interact with specific behavior. (Author/CL)

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Abstract

Effects of the label "mentally retarded" on attitudes of peers were examined among 48 third grade pupils. Half the subjects were shown a video tape of an actor displaying acting-out behavior, while the remaining half were shown a video tape with the same actor engaging in passive behavior. Half the subjects in each of these two groups were told that the actor was a fifth grade pupil and the other half were told that he was a mentally retarded boy in a special class. Analysis of variance results revealed a significant interaction between label and behavior, indicating that subjects responded more negatively to the "mentally retarded" actor who displayed acting-out behavior than to the same actor who exhibited identical behavior but was not labeled. It was concluded that labels should be considered only as they interact with specific behavior.

ATTITUDES TOWARD RETARDED CHILDREN: EFFECTS OF LABELING AND BEHAVIORAL AGGRESSIVENESS

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This report is the second in a series designed to study the effects of the label, "mentally retarded" on the verbally expressed attitudes of children toward their mentally retarded peers. In a prior investigation, Gottlieb (1974) found that attitudes expressed toward children who displayed academically competent behavior were more favorable than attitudes toward children who exhibited incompetent levels of performance, regardless of whether these children were normal or labeled mentally retarded. The present investigation examined the effects of aggressive behavior on attitudes toward a labeled and unlabeled child.

The commonly held belief among many special educators is that labels operate to the detriment of the person who is labeled. The recent thrust toward normalization in general and public school mainstreaming in particular originated in part from the desire to reduce the stigma that is associated with the label, "mentally retarded." The implicit assumption in public school mainstreaming programs is that attitudes of peers toward mentally retarded children will improve when the latter are delabeled and educated in regular grades. Recent reviews, however, indicate that the influence of the label may not be so pervasive as is commonly believed (Guskin, Bartel, & MacMillan, in press; MacMillan, Jones, & Aloia, 1974). Furthermore, there is evidence that delabeling and reintegration do not result in improved attitudes toward EMR children but results instead in greater rejection of these children than of labeled children (Goodman, Gottlieb, & Harrison, 1972; Gottlieb & Budoff, 1973).

One possible explanation for the greater rejection of nonlabeled retarded children is that nonEMR peers may grant a dispensation to children who engage in inappropriate behavior when the behavior is attributable to a known cause, e.g., mental retardation. When the dominant group is not aware of the labeled status of the misbehaving person, however, they may denigrate him if he does not meet the behavioral standards of the group. The implication of this explanation for the greater rejection of nonlabeled children is that labels may serve a protective function by shielding the labeled person from overt rejection. This view regarding the effects of labeling contrasts with the more dominant view of many special educators that labels may serve only a harmful purpose.

To argue that labels result in negative attitudes toward the individual who is labeled is to ignore the possibility that the individual would have been rejected even if he were not labeled. Johnson (1950) and Baldwin (1958) have reported that retarded children in the regular grades who were never assigned to special classes, i.e., were never labeled, were still rejected by their peers significantly more often than normal children. These investigators found that the retarded children were rejected because their peers perceived them as anti-social and aggressive.

To understand the effects of the label <u>per se</u> on attitude expression, the effects of the label must be isolated from the behavior that may have been responsible for the labeled status. Many children are labeled when they are placed in special classes because of aggressive behavior. Since nonlabeled retarded children have been found to be rejected when they manifest this behavior, the issue regarding labeling that must be addressed concerns the additive effects of the label and the behavior on the expression of negative

verbal attitudes. More specifically, what is the contribution toward verbal attitudes of the label per se over and above the contribution of the behavior manifested by the individual? The present investigation was designed to determine the relative contribution of the label and aggressive behavior to the expression of negative attitudes.

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-eight third grade pupils who attended school in an affluent middle class suburb participated as subjects in this experiment. The school in which the subjects were enrolled contained a special class for retarded children. During the previous year, several special class children were reintegrated into the regular grades in this school. Those EMR children who were not reintegrated but remained in the special class were also highly visible to their nonretarded peers because their classroom contained a glass wall that faced the main corridor of the school building. Since all children passed this corridor on the way to their classrooms and the school office, they could easily observe the activities of the special class.

Video tapes

Two video tapes were produced with two 12 year old boys as actors. The two actors attended a private school and lived in a different town from the subjects.

In the first of the two video tapes, "John," the target actor, was seen as engaging in socially appropriate behavior, molding clay while seated quietly behind his desk at school. In the second video tape, John displayed hostile, acting-out behavior while playing with the clay, throwing it on the floor, stomping on it, and banging it with his fist. In both video tapes,

"Billy," the second actor, was portrayed as manifesting socially appropriate behavior. The two behavioral episodes were staged by the experimenter who asked John to behave appropriately or otherwise, depending on the video tape vignette being filmed. Each video tape ran for approximately 2 minutes and 40 seconds.

Procedures

Each of the 48 subjects was randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions. Half the subjects saw John engaging in acting-out behavior and the remaining half saw him exhibiting socially appropriate behavior. For those subjects who viewed John as acting-out, half were told that he was a fifth grade pupil and the other half were told that John was mentally retarded and enrolled in a special class for retarded pupils. The same procedure was adopted for subjects who saw John engaging in socially appropriate behavior, i.e., half were told that he was a fifth grade pupil and half were informed that he was enrolled in a special class for retarded pupils. All subjects were told that Billy, the second boy in the video tape, was in a fifth grade class.

Subjects were brought into the testing room in groups of four and told that they would watch a video tape of two boys playing. Depending on the treatment condition to which they were assigned, subjects were told either that both boys in the video tapes were fifth grade pupils, or that John was mentally retarded and in a special class for retarded children. The names and class affiliations (fifth grade or special class) of the two actors were repeated by the experimenter two more times prior to the administration of the questionnaires.

Immediately upon the completion of the video tape, subjects were told they would be asked some questions about John. Two questionnaires were then distributed. The first was a modification of the Cunningham Social Distance Scale (Cunningham, Elzi, Hall, Farrell, & Roberts, 1951) in which a sixth category, I would not want John in my school, was added to the existing five. The second questionnaire was a five point rating scale of 10 adjective pairs on which the subjects were asked to rate John. Previous research with this instrument revealed that it successfully discriminated attitudes toward special class and regular class children (Gottlieb, Cohen, & Goldstein, 1974). The order of presentation of the two instruments was randomly varied in each group.

Scoring

Scores on the social distance scale ranged from 1 to 6, with a score of 6 indicating the most favorable statement. On the rating scale, the 10 adjective pairs, each of which could be rated along a five-point continuum, yielded a possible range per subject of 10 to 50. The higher score was assigned to the more favorable attitude expression.

RESULTS

A 2 X 2 (Label X Behavior) multivariate analysis of variance was performed on scores on the two attitude scales. Three significant multivariate effects were obtained: a Label main effect ($F = 7.62$, $df = 2/43$, $p < .001$), a Behavior main effect ($F = 11.27$, $df = 2/43$, $p < .001$), and the interaction between the two factors ($F = 3.80$, $df = 2/43$, $p < .05$)

Univariate analyses of variance on each dependent measure revealed a significant Label effect on the rating scale: attitudes toward the actor were more

favorable when he was designated as a fifth grade pupil than when he was labeled mentally retarded ($F = 12.75$, $df = 1/44$, $p < .001$). The effect of Label was not significant on the social distance scale. Behavior was found to be significant on both the rating scale ($F = 12.75$, $df = 1/44$, $p < .001$) and the social distance questionnaire ($F = 9.27$, $df = 1/44$, $p < .001$). Means and standard deviations in Table 1 indicate that the actor was rated more favorably when he engaged in socially appropriate behavior than when he manifested aggressive, acting-out behavior.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Label X Behavior interaction was significant in the univariate analysis on the rating scale data ($F = 5.13$, $df = 1/44$, $p < .03$). Attitudes were least favorable when the actor manifested aggressive behavior and was also labeled mentally retarded. Specifically, average ratings of the nonaggressive actor were similar when he was labeled retarded or designated as a fifth grade pupil; however, aggressive behavior resulted in much lower ratings when the actor was labeled mentally retarded. The interaction was not significant on the social distance scale ($p < .15$), although the direction of the means was similar to that obtained with the rating scale.

In order to examine the relative contribution of the behavior and the label to attitudes, omega (Hayes, 1963) was used to calculate the percent of variance accounted for by the label, the behavior, and the interaction. Results indicated that 15.5% of the variance in the rating scale scores was accounted for by the label and an identical amount of variance was due to the behavior. The interaction between the label and the behavior contributed 5.5% of the variance in this dependent measure. On the social distance scale, 14.0% of the variance was attributable to the Behavior factor while the Label factor

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Rating Scale and Social Distance Scale

Condition	Rating scale		Social Distance Scale	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Retarded nonaggressive	41.50	4.12	5.58	0.52
Retarded aggressive	34.42	4.89	3.83	1.90
Normal nonaggressive	43.08	3.40	5.58	0.52
Normal aggressive	41.50	4.28	5.00	1.71

contributed only 2.2%, the same amount of variance as the interaction.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate the importance of considering the effects of the label as it interacts with the behavior exhibited by the child. When an actor who engaged in aggressive, acting-out behavior was designated as a fifth grade pupil he was viewed much more positively than when he was labeled mentally retarded, even though he exhibited identical behavior.

The significant effects of the label, as well as the interaction between the label and the behavior, are in contrast with results of a similar experimental paradigm (Gottlieb, 1974), which examined the effects of the label and academic performance on attitudes. Results of that study indicated that the label per se did not significantly affectsattitude scores nor did it interact with the level of academic competence displayed by the actor. Taken together, these two labeling studies elucidate some of the complexity involved in the effect of labels on attitudes. Clearly, the effect of the label is not consistent but depends largely on the behavior that accompanies the label. In the present investigation the low ratings of the aggressive actor who was labeled contributed substantially to the significant main effect due to the label. The absence of a significant main effect for label in the study of a academic competence is probably attributable to the failure of that experimental design to take into account variance due to aggressive behavior.

It can be concluded from the two studies that labels are important contributors to negative attitudes, but only under certain circumstances, e.g., when they appear in combination with aggressive, acting-out behavior. The two studies also suggest that blanket denunciations of labeling as ubiquitous contributors to negative attitudes are unfounded. A more profitable avenue of inquiry would be to specify the behaviors and situations in which labels contribute to negative

attitudes, in contrast to situations in which the effects of the label are minimal.

No support was found in the present investigation for the view that labels serve a protective function by shielding the labeled individual from overt rejection. One possible explanation for this may be that the subject sample was too young and was not yet socialized to the extent of expressing only kind and altruistic statements about mentally retarded people. In fact, the confusing and contradictory array of research findings regarding peer attitudes toward mentally retarded children (Gottlieb, 1974a) may be the result of investigators' failure to consider the level of cognitive development of their subject samples with regard to the subjects' feelings that it may not be socially appropriate to express negative statements about handicapped people.

Given the fact that many children are labeled, i.e., sent to special classes, because they engage in acting-out behavior this study suggests that if these children continue to act-out in the special class, they would be rejected by their peers to an even greater extent than when they were in the regular grades. A series of classroom observation studies comparing the behavior of reintegrated former special class children with pupils who remained in special classes indicated that the regular class retarded pupils engaged in higher incidences of prosocial behavior than the segregated children and slightly, although not significantly, less physically aggressive behavior than their nonretarded classmates (Gampel, Gottlieb, & Harrison, 1974; Gottlieb, Gampel, & Budoff, in press). It is interesting to speculate whether children who formerly engaged in aggressive behavior in special classes and were consequently rejected (Johnson, 1950; Baldwin, 1958), engage in more prosocial behavior after they are in regular grades because of their prior history of rejection in special classes.

The sample in the present study was drawn from an affluent community. Since Gottlieb (1974) previously observed the effects of academic performance were differentially influential on the expression of verbal attitudes among middle and low SES children, it is quite conceivable that similar differences between SES levels would emerge with regard to aggressive behavior.

Finally, it must be noted that the present investigation was solely concerned with the effects of labels and behavior on the attitudes of peers. There are other areas where labels may affect the well-being of the labeled individual, such as the attitudes of teachers and parents as well as the person's self-image. The present investigation these other, important concerns and no statements regarding the impact of labels on them can be made.

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FOOTNOTES

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